

BBC FOOD

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How the food miles 'myth' became a 'mantra'



Do you worry about eating imported berries out-of-season?

Will buying locally-produced food save the planet? Food writer Stefan Gates argues that it's not worth worrying about "food miles".

Are you a good person? Of course you are - you're lovely.

When it comes to food, I'd warrant that you care passionately about how your food's been produced; you'd rather your chicken wasn't tortured before handing over its precious muscle fibre, and you'd rather your lunch didn't chip away at the planet's ability to sustain itself.

So if you can, you buy fresh, local, seasonal food because keeping food miles to an absolute minimum is a no-brainer, isn't it?

Local food in the UK (if that's where you are): good. Food imported from New Zealand: bad. Well, not necessarily, as it turns out.

Best of British:



[Try poaching chicken with vegetables](#)

[Use leeks in a soup with potatoes](#)

[Pair forced rhubarb with custard in a tart](#)

When I made the first series of [Gastronuts](#), a CBBC food adventure series for children, we wanted to turn food miles into an irreverent but enlightening game that revealed how far our lunch has to travel to get to our plates. It involved a furry toy lamb and a very large catapult.

As we researched the item it transpired that the relationship between food miles and sustainability was nowhere near as clear-cut as we'd thought, and sometimes it simply didn't add up at all.

It was too late to change the scene, so we catapulted our lamb round to show the extraordinary distance that some food travels before it's eaten, without making any intelligent comments at all. It was a funny scene in the end. Slightly aimless, but very funny.

The term "food miles" was coined by Professor of Food Policy at City University, Tim Lang and featured in a famous [1994 report on The Dangers of Long-Distance Food Transport](#).

The report looked at a whole range of social and environmental issues relating to transporting food, but seeing as the title was The Food Miles Report, the main argument was invariably boiled down to the idea that the further food travels, the more fuel has been used, ergo the worse the carbon footprint.

The phrase "food miles" instantly became a mantra because it was nifty and simple, and no-one really questioned it because the food media world loves mantras and clichés.

What do you think?



Should we worry about food miles? [Join food writer and broadcaster Stefan Gates at 21:00 GMT on 24 February straight after Food & Drink on BBC Two](#)

We're fed mantras, buzzwords and clichés, such as "good, honest food" (I've never met a pie with a moral compass), "processed food is bad" (that would include homemade jam, then), "additives are bad" (so you'd rather have botulism in your bacon sandwich, sir?) and "food miles are bad".

But what's wrong with the food miles concept?

The problem is that transport accounts for just 11% of the carbon emissions embedded in the food system (according to a Carnegie Mellon University review of US government data 2008), and of that, the final delivery transport from producer/processor to retailer is even less.

A [global agriculture research partnership CGIAR](#), puts it at 3% and Carnegie Mellon's report at 4%. It's not insignificant, but let's face it: it's tiny.

Agriculture as a whole accounts for a huge amount of global CO2 equivalent emissions - about 14-24%.

But this is where it gets really fascinating: of the direct agricultural emissions around 31% comes from enteric fermentation - cow and sheep producing gasses as a by-product of their digestion - and [32% produced by soil from crop production, fertiliser use and crop residues](#), mainly as nitrous oxide.



Lamb produced in NZ has a small carbon footprint, research has found

A vast proportion of agricultural carbon emissions come from animals and the soil itself, as well as deforestation, fuel usage from farm machinery, buildings, heating, water usage and the production of fertiliser, pesticide and herbicide.

So, when you analyse the production of lamb or apples from New Zealand, which has a climate, soil and hydro-electric power source that allows low-carbon production of lamb and apples, it's quite possible for the transport emissions involved in shipping it to the UK to be far outweighed by the savings made at the farm.

This was reported, to the barely-concealed glee of the authors, in a study by Lincoln University in New Zealand, entitled [Food Miles - Comparative Energy/Emissions Performance of New Zealand's Agriculture Industry](#).

This apparent paradox is called comparative advantage.

Food writer Jay Rayner explains this concept of comparative advantage very well in his book *A Greedy Man in a Hungry World*.

You can happily grow potatoes in the clay soils of London, but compared to the better-suited soils of Lincolnshire, he writes: "You would need 20% more land. Or you'd have to bombard that land with military-strength doses of fertiliser. Either way, the footprint of your potatoes would be bigger."

Carbon footprint is just one of a multitude of decisions people make when you buying food, and sometimes it will be trumped by issues such as animal welfare, nutrition, taste, cost, or how many bags can be be squeezed onto the number 73 bus.

But there are still lots of wonderful reasons to buy locally-produced food.

Help your community by spending your money locally, strengthen the bonds between you, your neighbours and your farmers and take more interest in what you eat - it's all fantastic stuff.

Buy local food if it makes sense to you, but please don't buy into the lazy clichés that you're inevitably saving the planet by doing it.

Should we feel guilty about food miles? Join Stefan Gates online for a [live debate](#) at 21:00 GMT Monday 24 Feb following [Food & Drink on BBC Two](#).

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